

[A PADDLING SUPERSTAR]

TAO Berman

This world-famous kayaker
grew up without running water.
Now he has lots of it.

BY LAURIE ROBINSON

For Tao Berman, it's not about the necktie. It's about the neck gasket. And risk is not about hedge funds or shaky mortgages. It's about studying a 100-foot waterfall and calculating just how perfect he'll have to be in the two-second descent to paddle away from it at the bottom.

One of the best-known kayakers in the world, Berman has figured out how to make about \$250,000 a year off his kayaking. Most of it, he says, comes from sponsorships, but video projects and the occasional ad campaigns and infomercial endorsements add to his income stream.

In a sport that generally doesn't pay big bucks, and aside from boat manufacturers, he could well be the most financially successful pro kayaker in history.

"As far as making money off your talents in the kayak, there's not anybody even close to Tao," says his longtime friend and videographer Eric Link, who has featured Berman in six videos. The most recent, "Pulse," came out this year.

"He's been really successful because he's a real negotiator," Link says. "It's another challenge for him — it's all about working the deal." (Growing up around barter fairs in Okanogan, Wash., didn't hurt, Link adds.)

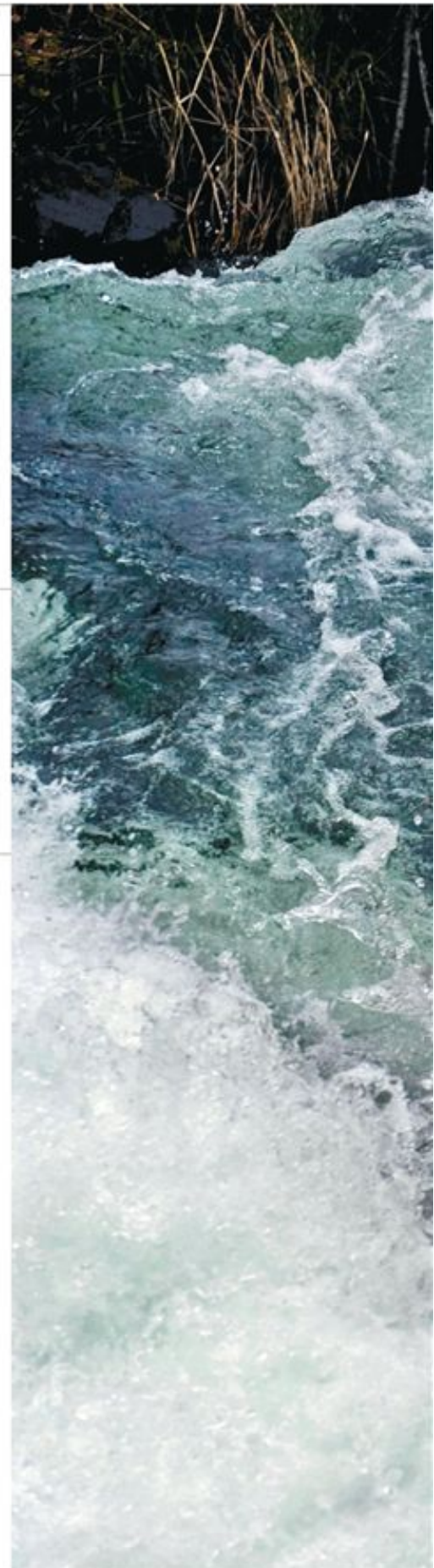
Berman's sponsorships include Dagger kayaks, Red Bull, Timberland, AT Paddles, Stohlquist WaterWare — oh, and Subaru gives him vehicles.


Berman's intensely focused efforts to set waterfall records (98.4 feet in 1999), win freestyle competitions (a pre-world championship) and extreme races (undefeated last year), combined with his self-marketing skills means he could live just about anywhere that has class 5 water nearby.

But to Berman, a native of Washington state who has traveled all over the world to make first descents, one place is the ideal "anywhere": the Columbia Gorge.

"I can't imagine ever not having a house in the gorge," he says. "It's really an ideal playground for any outdoor athlete."

Berman lives on a bluff in White Salmon, Wash., face-to-face with Mount Hood through a bank of windows and across the Columbia. Decor is fairly »





Husum Falls, on the White Salmon River, is a small falls for the likes of Tao Berman — but it's only 10 minutes from his house in the gorge.

PHOTO BY STEVEN NEHL

By the numbers

29: Age

5-6: Height

98.4 feet: World waterfall record that he set in 1999 at Johnston Falls in Alberta. The kayak he used is at the Pyranha boat museum in England.

55 mph: Estimated speed reached in the descent.

300 feet: Height he kayaked down the cascading Lacy Falls on the British Columbia coast, which he calls perhaps his most dangerous waterfall run because of the 3-foot-deep landing zone with barnacle-encrusted rocks under the surface. (World records aren't kept on such "sliding" waterfalls.)

Around \$250,000: His annual kayaking-related income

0: Number of serious injuries in his 15-year boating career

His name: His mom heard the word on her world travels and liked the sound of it. Rhymes with Day-oh, not Dow. Despite the philosophical/religious meaning of "tao" (which his mom summarizes as "flow of life"), he says, "I'm not deep on a spiritual level, I'm really not."

Berman's peak training regime includes:

- 300 pull-ups every other day, in sets that may start at 45 pull-ups and drop to 10 by the end of the session. After every 100, he takes a break with an ab workout. He does the final 100 wearing a 40-pound pack.
- Sprinting up 420 steps, two at a time, from downtown Hood River to the heights, three sets, three times a week ("unbelievably painful").
- 5 days a week in the kayak, as fast as he can rip through Class 5 runs, wearing a heart monitor.

Favorite training runs: Green Truss section of the White Salmon (10 minutes from his house in White Salmon), and the Little White Salmon.

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minimal, with an emphasis on framed articles and photos of his exploits, but sunlight fills the space.

Five or six years ago, Berman was the best kayaker in the world — “certainly the best extreme kayaker” — says Christian Knight, an associate editor for Paddler magazine. Knight has known Berman since they were teens, and they were once housemates and training partners.

“We’ve been very good friends for many years, bitter enemies for a few minutes and then good friends again. . . . I can tell you there’s no one quite like Tao,” Knight says. “He can rile you into a rage but inspire you beyond your loftiest goals.”

At 29, Berman is focusing on extreme racing now, but he’s also still doing the kind of burly first descents that don’t get run again for years — or ever, Link says.

The most famous of Berman’s exploits, and the one that landed him everywhere from NBC’s “Dateline” to a long feature in Sports Illustrated, was the descent of Johnston Falls in Banff National Park in Alberta. It took 2.4 seconds to do the 98.4 feet, earning “world record waterfall descent” honors from Guinness.

Berman says he has no fear at the top of waterfalls, even though one mistake — a mistimed paddle stroke or the wrong body position on the landing — can mean a shattered spine or death.

“There’s no fear factor because he knows he can do it,” says Link, who has watched other kayakers he’s filmed get so jittery that he wondered why they were there.

Fear holds you back, Berman says — and not just in kayaking.

“Imagine what all of us could accomplish if we didn’t have any fear — if we went for whatever we want to accomplish,” he says

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cheerfully. "Granted, a few more of us may die in the process, or fail in the process, but I suspect most people would probably have a better, more fulfilling life."

Which brings up this question: What is he afraid of?

"Marriage," he says, pausing, then laughing.

"Commitment."

Berman's smile turns a hint painful. He says his parents split up when he was 4, and his memories of them together were all about fighting.

His father goes by the name Birch and his mother by Silver Moon.

"They were hippies, for sure," says Berman, who grew up in a cabin in northeast Washington, near the Canadian border—without electricity or plumbing till he was about 10. His mom was a prodigious gardener who raised chickens and let a month or more go by in between visits to the closest town, Curlew, and the grocery store.

The back-to-the-land lifestyle ended when Silver Moon asked her children what she could do for them and Berman's sister Lilly immediately said, "Electricity."

The family moved to western Washington, where Silver Moon encouraged outdoor activities as a diversion from the fights her son was getting into in school.

When he was 14, she took him down the Skykomish one day — a serious whitewater river — in a \$70 inflatable kayak. They survived the adventure, he connected with a mentor — and kayaking consumed him.

When he finished high school, he knew he wanted to be a pro, though he did try Southern Oregon University for a couple of years.

"Everyone told me, 'Tao, nobody makes money at kayaking. You're not going to be able to,'" he says.

"Had I listened to them, they would have been right." *

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